The PRICE

By FRANCIS LYNDE

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CHAPTER XXVIII—Continued.
—14—

After the introduction to Johnson his hand had gone mechanically to his coat pocket. The demon at his ear was whispering "kill! kill!" and his fingers sought and found the weapon. While he was listening with the outward ear to Bainbridge's cheerful reminiscences, the little minutiae were arranging themselves; he saw where Broffin would step, and was careful to mark that none of the bystanders would be in range. He would wait until there could be no possibility of missing; then he would fire—from the pocket.

It was Johnson who broke the spell. While Bainbridge was insisting that Griswold should come in and make a social third at the hotel dinner table, the teller picked up his hand-bag and mounted the steps. Griswold's brain fell into halves. With one of them he was making excuses to the newspaper man; with the other he saw Broffin stop Johnson and draw him aside.

What the detective was saying was only too plainly evident. Johnson wheeled short to face the sidewalk group, and Griswold could feel in every fiber of him the searching scrutiny to which he was being subjected. When he stole a glance at the pair on the porch, Johnson was shaking his head slowly; and he did it again after a second thoughtful stare. Griswold, missing completely now what Bainbridge was saying, overheard the teller's low-toned rejoinder to the detective's urgings: "It's no use, Mr. Broffin; I'd have to swear positively to it, you know, and I couldn't do that. . . . No, I don't want to hear your corroborative evidence; it might make me see a resemblance where there is none. Wait until Mr. Galbraith recovers; he's your man."

Griswold hardly knew how he made shift to get away from Bainbridge finally; but when it was done, and he was crossing the little triangular park which filled the angle between the business squares and the lake-fronting residence streets, he was sweating profusely, and the departing fear-mania was leaving him weak and tremulous.

Passing the stone-basined fountain in the middle of the park he stopped, jerked the pistol from his pocket, spilled the cartridges from its magazine, and stooped to grope for a loose stone in the walk-border. With the fountain base for an anvil and the loosened border stone for a hammer he beat the weapon into shapeless inutility and flung it away.

"God knows whom I shall be tempted to kill, next!" he groaned; and the trembling fit was still unnerving him when he went on to keep the appointment made by Charlotte Farnham.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Dust and Ashes.

A full moon, blood-red from the smoke of forest fires far to the eastward, was rising over the Wahaska hills when Griswold unlatched the gate of the Farnham inclosure and passed quickly up the walk.

Since the summoning note had stressed the urgencies, he was not surprised to find the writer of it awaiting his coming on the vine-shadowed porch. In his welcoming there was a curious mingling of constraint and impatience, and he was moved to marvel. Miss Farnham's outlook upon life, the point of view of the ideally well balanced, was uniformly poiseful and self-contained, and he was wondering if some fresh entanglement were threatening when she motioned him to a seat and placed her own chair so that the light from the sitting-room windows would leave her in the shadow.

"You had my note?" she began.

"Yes. It came while I was away from the hotel, and the regular trip of the inn brake was the first conveyance I could catch. Am I late?"

Her reply was qualified. "That remains to be seen."

There was a hesitant pause, and then she went on: "Do you know why I sent for you to come?"

"No, not definitely."

"I was hoping you would know; it would make it easier for me. You owe me something, Mr. Griswold."

"I owe you a great deal," he admitted, warmly. "It is hardly putting it too strong to say that you have made some part of my work possible which would otherwise have been impossible."

"I didn't mean that," she dissented, with a touch of cool scorn. "I have no especial ambition to figure as a character, however admirable, in a book. Your obligation doesn't lie in the literary field; it is real—and personal. You have done me a great injustice, and it seems to have been carefully premeditated."

The blow was so sudden and so calmly driven home that Griswold gasped.

"An injustice—to you?" he protested; but she would not let him go on.

"Yes. At first, I thought it was only a coincidence—your coming to Wahaska—but now I know better. You came here, in goodness knows what spirit of reckless bravado, because it was my home; and you made the decision apparently without any consideration for me; without any thought of the embarrassments and difficulties in which it might involve me."

Truly, the heavens had fallen and the solid earth was reeling! Griswold lay back in the deep lounging chair and fought manfully to retain some little hold upon the anchorings. Could this be his ideal; the woman whom he had set so high above all others in the scale of heroic faultlessness and sublime devotion to principle? And she was so much a slave of the conventional as to be able to tell him coldly that she had recognized him again, and that her chief concern was the embarrassment it was causing her? Before he could gather the words for any adequate rejoinder, she was going on pointedly:

"You have done everything you could to make the involvement complete. You have made friends of my friends, and you came here as a friend of my father. You have drawn Edward Raymer into the entanglement and helped him with the stolen money. In every way you have sought to make it more and more impossible for me to give information against you—and you have succeeded. I can't do it now, without facing a scandal that would never die in a small place like this, and without bringing trouble and ruin upon a family of our nearest friends. And that is why I sent for you today; and why I say you owe me something."

Griswold was sitting up again, and he had recovered some small measure of self-possession.

"I certainly owe you many apologies, at least," he said, ironically. "I have really been doing you a great injustice, Miss Farnham—a very grave injustice, though not exactly of the kind you mention. I think I have been misapprehending you from the beginning. How long have you known me as the man who is wanted in New Orleans?"

"A long time; though I tried not to believe it at first. It seemed incredible that the man I had spoken to on the Belle Julie would come here and put me in such a false position."

"Good heavens!" he broke out; "is your position all you have been thinking of? Is that the only reason why you haven't set the dogs on me?"

"It is the chief reason why I couldn't afford to do anything more than I have done. Goodness knows, I have

"Is That the Only Reason Why You Haven't Set the Dogs on Me?"

tried in every way to warn you, even to pointing out the man who is shadowing you. To do it, I have had to deceive my father. I have been hoping that you would understand and go away."

"Wait a minute," he commanded. "Let me get it straight! you still believe that the thing I did was a criminal thing?"

"We needn't go into that part of it again," she returned, with a sort of placid impatience. "Once I thought that there might be some way in which you had justified yourself to yourself, but now—"

"That isn't the point," he interupted roughly. "What I want to know is this: Do you still believe it is a crime?"

"Of course, it is a crime; I know it, you know it, all the world knows it."

Again he sat back and took time to gather up a few of the scattered shards and fragments. When he spoke it was to say: "I think the debt is on the other side, Miss Charlotte; I think you owe me something. You probably won't understand when I say that you have robbed me of a very precious thing—my faith in the ultimate goodness of a good woman. You believe—you have always believed—that I am a criminal; and yet you have been weak enough to let expediency seal your lips. I am truer to my code than you are to yours, as you shall see if the day ever comes when I shall be convinced that I did wrong. But that is neither here nor there. You sent for me; what is it that you want me to do?"

"I want to give you one more chance to disappoint the Wahaska gossips," she replied, entirely unmoved, as it seemed, by his harsh arraignment. "Do you know why this man Broffin is still waiting?"

"I can guess. He is taking a long chance on the chapter of accidents."

"Not altogether. Three days ago, Mr. Galbraith had Miss Grierson telegraph to New Orleans for some one of the bank officials. Yesterday I learned that the man who is coming is the teller who waited on me and who gave you the money. As soon as I heard that, I began to try to find you."

Griswold did not tell her that the danger she feared was a danger past.

"Go on," he prompted.

"You are no longer safe in Wahaska," she asserted. "The teller can identify you, and the detective will give him the opportunity. That is doubtless what he is waiting for."

"And you would suggest that I make a run for it? Is that why you sent for me?"

"It is. You are tempting fate by staying; and, notwithstanding what you have said, I still insist that you owe me something. There is a fast train west at ten o'clock. If you need ready money—"

Griswold laughed. It had gone beyond the tragic and was fast lapsing into comedy, farce.

"We are each of us appearing in a new role tonight, Miss Farnham," he said, with sardonic humor; "I as the hunted criminal, and you as the equally culpable accessory after the fact. If I run away, what shall be done with the—the 'swag,' the bulk of which, as you know, is tied up in Raymer's business?"

"I have thought of that," she returned calmly, "and that is another reason why you shouldn't let them take you. Right or wrong, you have incurred a fresh responsibility in your dealings with Mr. Raymer; and Edward, who is perfectly innocent, must be protected in some way."

It was not in human nature to resist the temptation to strike back.

"I have told Raymer how he can most sucessfully underwrite his financial risk," he said, with malice intentional.

"How?"

"By marrying Miss Grierson."

He had touched the springs of anger at last.

"That woman!" she broke out. And then: "If you have said that to Edward Raymer, I shall never forgive you as long as I live! It is your affair to secure Edward against loss in the money matter—your own individual responsibility, Mr. Griswold. He accepted the money in good faith, and—"

Again Griswold gave place to the caustic humor and finished for her.

—"And, though it is stolen money, it must not be taken away from him. Once, when I was even more foolish than I am now, I said of you that you would be a fitting heroine in a story in which the hero should be a man who might need to borrow a conscience. It's quite the other way around."

"We needn't quarrel," she said, retreating again behind the barrier of cold reserve. "I suppose I have given you the right to say disagreeable things to me, if you choose to assert it. But we are wasting time which may be very precious. Will you go away, as I have suggested?"

He found his hat and got upon his feet rather unsteadily.

"I don't know; possibly I shall. But in any event, you needn't borrow any more trouble, either on your own account, or on Raymer's. By the merest chance, I met Johnson, the teller you speak of, a few minutes ago at the Winnebago house and was introduced to him. He didn't know me, then, or later, when Broffin was telling him that he ought to know me. Hence, the matter rests as it did before—between you and Mr. Galbraith."

"Mr. Galbraith?"

"Yes. That was a danger past, too, a short time ago. I met him, socially, and he didn't recognize me. Afterward, Broffin pointed me out to him, and again he failed to identify me. But the other day, after I had pulled him out of the lake, he remembered. I've been waiting to see what he will do."

"He will do nothing. You saved his life."

Griswold shook his head.

"I am still man enough to hope that he won't let the bit of personal service make him compound a felony."

"Why do you call it that?" she demanded.

"Because, from his point of view, and yours, that is precisely what it is; and it is what you are doing, Miss Farnham. I, the criminal, say this to you. You should have given me up the moment you recognized me. That is your creed, and you should have lived up to it. Since you haven't, you have wronged yourself and have made me the poorer by a thing that—"

"Stop!" she cried, standing up to face him. "Do you mean to tell me that you are ungrateful enough to—"

"No; ingratitude isn't quite the word. I'm just sorry; with the sorrow you have when you look for something that you have a right to expect, and find that it isn't there; that it has never been there; that it isn't anywhere. You have hurt me, and you have hurt yourself; but there is still a chance for you. When I am gone, go to the telephone and call Broffin at the Winnebago house. You can tell him that he will find me at my rooms. Good-by."

He was half way to the foot of Lake-view avenue, striding along moodily with his head down and his hands behind him, when he collided violently with Raymer going in the opposite direction. The shock was so unexpected that Griswold would have been knocked down if the muscular young iron founder had not caught him promptly. At the saving instant came mutual recognition.

"Hello, there!" said Raymer. "You are the very man I've been looking for. Charlotte wants to see you."

"Not now she doesn't," was the rather grim contradiction. "I have just left her."

"Oh."

There was a pause, and then Griswold cut in morosely.

"So you did take my way out of the labor trouble, after all, didn't you?"

Raymer looked away.

"I don't know just how you'd like to have me answer that, Kenneth. How much or how little do you know of what happened?"

"Nothing at all"—shortly.

"Well, it was Margery who wrought the miracle, of course. I don't know, yet, just how she did it; but it was done, and done right."

"And you have asked her to marry you?"

"Suffering Scott! how you do come at a man! Yes, I asked her, if you've got to know."

"Well?" snapped Griswold.

"She—she turned me down, Kenneth; got up and walked all over me. That's a horrible thing to make me say, but it's the truth."

"I don't understand it, Raymer. Was it the No that means No?"

"I don't understand it, either," returned the iron founder, with grave naivete. "And, yes, I guess she meant it. But that reminds me. She knew I was looking for you and she gave me a note—let me see, I've got it here somewhere; oh, yes, here it is—gilt monogram and all."

Griswold took the note and pocketed it without comment and without looking at it.

"Were you going to Doctor Bertie's?" he asked.

"I was. Have you any objection?"

"Not the least in the world. It's a good place for you to go just now, and I guess you are the right man for the place. Good-night."

At the next corner where there was an electric light, Griswold stopped and opened the monogrammed envelope. The enclosure was a single sheet of perfumed note paper upon which, without date, address or signature was written the line:

"Mr. Galbraith is better—and he is grateful."

CHAPTER XXX.

Apples of Istakhar.

The swinging arc light suspended above the street crossing sputtered and died down to a dull red dot of incandescence as Griswold returned Margery's note to his pocket and walked on.

There are crises in which the chief contention looms so large as to leave no room for the ordinary mental processes. Griswold saw no significance in the broken line of Margery's message. The one tremendous revelation—the knowledge that the dross-creating curse had finally fallen upon the woman whose convictions should have saved her—was blotting out all the subtler perceptive faculties; and for the time the struggle with the submerging wave of disappointment and disheartenment was bitter.

He was two squares beyond the crossing of the broken-circuited arc light, and was still following the curve of the lakeside boulevard, when he came to the surface of the submerging wave long enough to realize that he had entered Jasper Grierson's portion of the water-front drive. The great house, dark as to its westward gables save for the lighted upper windows marking the sick room and its antechamber, loomed in massive solidity among its sheltering oaks; and the moon, which had now topped the hills and the crimsoning smoke haze, was bathing land and lakescape in a flood of silver light, whitening the pale yellow sands of the beach and etching fantastic leaf-traceries on the gravel of the boulevard driveway.

There was no inclosing fence on the Mereside border of the boulevard, and under the nearest of the lawn oaks there were rustic park seats, Jasper Grierson's single concession to the public when he had fought for and secured his property right-of-way through to the lake's margin. Griswold turned aside and sat down on one of the benches. The disappointment was growing less keen. He was beginning to understand that he had made no allowance for the eternal feminine in the idealized Fidelia—for the feminine and the straitly human. But the disheartenment remained. Should he stay and fight it out? Or should he take pity upon the poor prisoner of the conventions and seek to postpone the day of reckoning by flight?

He had not fitted the answer to either of these sharp-pointed queries when a pair of light-fingered hands came from behind to clap themselves upon his eyes, and a well-known voice said, "Guess."

"Margery!" he said, and she laughed with the joyous unconstraint of a happy child and came around to sit by him.

"I was doing time out on the veranda, and I saw you down here in the moonlight, looking as if you had lost something," she explained, adding: "Have you?"

"I don't know; can you lose that which you've never had?" he returned musingly. And then: "Yes; perhaps I did lose something. Don't ask me what it is. I hardly know, myself."

"You have just come from Doctor Bertie's?" she inquired.

"Yes."

"And Charlotte doesn't want to marry you?"

"Heavens and earth!" he exploded. "Who put the idea into your head that I wanted to marry her?"

"You did"—calmly.

"Then, for pity's sake, let me take it out, quick. If I were the last man on earth, Miss Farnham wouldn't marry me; and if she were the last woman, I think I'd go drown myself in the lake!"

The young woman of the many metamorphoses was laughing again, and this time the laugh was a letter-perfect imitation of a schoolgirl giggle.

"My!" she said. "How dreadfully hard she must have sat on you!"

"Please don't laugh," he pleaded; "unless you are the heartless kind of person who would laugh at a funeral. I'm down under the hoofs of the horses, at last, Margery, girl. Before you

Very Gently He Took Her in His Arms Again.

came, I was wondering if the game were at all worth the candle."

Her mood changed in the twinkling of an eye. "The battle is over, and won," she said, speaking softly. "Didn't you know that?" And then: "Oh, boy, boy! but it has been a desperate fight! Time and again I have thought you were gone, in spite of all I could do!"

"You thought—I was gone? Then you know?"

"Of course I know; I have known ever since the first night; the night when I found the money in your suitcase. What a silly, silly thing it was for you to do—to leave the Bayou State Security slips on the packages!"

"But you said—"

"No, I didn't say; I merely let you believe that I didn't see them. After that, I knew it would be only a question of time until they would trace you here, and I hurried; oh, I hurried! I made up my mind that before the struggle came, all Wahaska should know you, not as a bank robber, but as you are, and I made it come out just that way. Then Mr. Broffin turned up, and the fight was on. He shadowed you, and I shadowed him—or had Johnnie Fergus do it for me. I knew he'd try Miss Farnham first, and there was only one hope there—that she might fall in love with you and so refuse to give you away. She did, didn't she?"

"Most emphatically, she did not," he denied. "You have greatly misjudged Miss Farnham. The reason—the only reason—why she did not tell Broffin what he wanted to know was a purely conventional one. She did not want to be the most-talked-of woman in Wahaska."

His companion's laugh was not pleasant.

"I'd rather be a spiteful little cat, which is what she once called me, than to be moth-eaten on the inside like that!" she commented. Then she went on: "With Miss Farnham out of it—and I knew she must be out of it, since Broffin didn't strike—there was still Mr. Galbraith. You didn't know why I was so anxious to have you get acquainted with him, but you know now. And it worked. When Broffin asked him to identify you, he couldn't—or wouldn't. Then came that unlucky drowning accident."

Griswold nodded slowly. "Yes, Mr. Galbraith knows me now."

"He doesn't!" she exulted. "He is a dear old saint, and he will never know you again as the man who held him up. Listen: He sent for Broffin this afternoon, and gave him a new commission—something about bonds in California. And he told him he must go on the first train!"

Once more the castaway was running the gamut of the fiercely varying emotions.

"Let me understand," he said. "You knew I had taken the money, and yet you did all these things to pull me out and make the holdup a success. Where was your moral sense, all this time, little girl?"

She made a charming little mouth at him.

"I am Joan, and the Joans don't have any moral senses—to speak of—do they? That's the way you are writing it down in your book, isn't it?" Then, with a low laugh that sounded some unfathomed depth of loving abandonment: "It was a game; and I played it—played it for all I was worth, and won. You are free; free as the air, Kenneth, boy. If Broffin should come here this minute and put his hand on your shoulder, you could look up and laugh in his face. Are you glad—or sorry?"

His answer was the answer of the man who was, for the time being, neither the moralist nor the criminal. With a swift outreaching he drew her to him, crushed her in his arms, covered her face with kisses.

"I am glad—glad that I am your lover," he whispered, passionately. "God, girl! but you are a woman to die for! No, not yet"—when she would have slipped out of his arms—believe, me, Margery; there has never been anyone else—not for a moment. But I thought it was Raymer, and for your sake and his I could have stepped aside. That is the one decent thing I have done in all this devilish business. Are you listening?"

She had stopped struggling, and was hiding her face on his shoulder. He felt her quick little nod and went on.

"Since you know the one decent thing, you must know all the horrible things, too. A dozen times I have been a murderer in heart."

She looked up quickly.

"No, boy, I'll never believe that—never!"

"Wait," he said. "It was there this evening—just a little while ago. Miss Farnham and Galbraith were not the only ones I had to fear; there was another; the teller who got here from New Orleans on the seven-forty-five train. You didn't know about him, did you? He came, and an old newspaper friend of mine was with him. I stumbled upon them on the sidewalk in front of the Winnebago house; and Broffin was there, too. We were introduced, the teller and I, and Broffin was so sure he had me that he got his handcuffs out and was opening them."

Margery shuddered and hid her face again. "And I—I didn't know!" she gasped.

"Luck was with me again," he continued. "Johnson didn't remember me; refused to do so even when Broffin stopped him and tried to tell him who I was. I had a pistol in my pocket, and it was aimed at Broffin. If he had made a move to take me, I should certainly have killed him."

She sat up suddenly.

"Give me that pistol, Kenneth—give it to me now!"

"I can't," he confessed, shamefacedly. "When it was all over, I smashed the pistol with a stone and threw it away."

She drew a long breath. "Is that all?" she asked.

"All but one thing; the worst of them all . . . that day in the bank vault—"

The daughter of men buried her face on his shoulder again at that. "Don't!" she begged. "You couldn't help it, boy; I made you do it—meaning to. There! and I said that wild horses should never drag it out of me!"

Again he said, "Wait," and covered the shining head on his shoulder with a caressing hand. "It wasn't love, then, little girl; that's what it breaks my heart to tell you—it was just madness. And it wasn't clean; you've got to know that, too."

She nodded her head violently. "I know," she murmured; "I knew it at the time, and that was what made me cry. But now it's—it's different, isn't it, boy? now you—are—"

"You have heard it all, Margery. You know what I thought I was, and what I have turned out to be. I'm afraid I am just a common crook, after all; there doesn't seem to be standing room anywhere else for me. But every living fiber of me, the good and the bad, loves you—loves you!"

"What do I care for anything else?" she flashed back. "You are you, Kenneth, dear; that is all I know, and all I care for. If you had stolen all the money in the world, and had killed a dozen men to make your get-away, it would be just the same. Only—"

"Only what?" he demanded jealously.

"It would be just the same to me; but—but. . . . Oh, boy, dear! it will never, never be the same to you!"

"I—I don't understand," he stammered.

"Some day you will. You call yourself a crook—man, man! there isn't a crooked drop of blood in you! Don't I know? You persuaded yourself that you had a right to take this money; perhaps you did have; I don't say you didn't. When I see anything I want, I reach out and take it, if I can—and I guess most people would, if they dared. But you are different; you are good. Some day all these dreadful things that have come tagging along after the fact will rise up and gnash their teeth at you and tell you that it was a sin, a crime And then—oh, boy, dear! then I shall lose you!"

Very gently he took her in his arms again; and for a time all things sensible and tangible, the deserted driveway, and the plashing of the little waves on the sands, the staring moonlight and the stenciled shadows of the oaks, were forgotten in the great soul-healing silence that wrapped them about and enveloped them.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Surely Prize Scarecrow.

An American tourist had been boasting again in the village inn, says London Tit-Bits.

"Talking of scarecrows," he said, with a drawl, "why, my father once put one up, and it frightened the crows so much that not one entered the field again for a year."

He looked triumphantly around his audience. Surely that had settled those country bumpkins.

But he was to meet his match.

"That's nothing," retorted one farmer. "A neighbor o' mine once put a scarecrow into his potato patch and it terrified the birds so much that one rascal of a crow who had stolen some potatoes came next day and put them back."